

Total Outdoor Water Ban: A Survival Guide

- **Prioritize:** Most grasses will go dormant and return when normal rainfall and irrigation return. Consider the value of the plant when deciding what to save and what measures to take. For example lawns and ornamental flowers are easily replaced. The value of a 150-year-old tree is clearly greater than easily replaced elements of your landscape.
- **Think about alternate sources of water:** Traditional irrigation is not the only source of water to help your most prized plants survive the water restrictions and drought.
 - **Air conditioner condensate:** Most air conditioners release a small amount of water (condensate). This is the result of the cooling your home. Some units produce as many as 20 gallons a day. This can be a precious resource to assist you in maintaining those plants you most value.
 - **Attach a hose to the relief pipe:** Some air conditioner units have a release pipe and a hose can be attached to this pipe and directed to a particular area. The hose can be moved and directed at different areas each day. This will deliver water to the roots of these plants slowly and deeply.
 - **Catch the water in a bucket:** For those who cannot attach a hose and direct the flow of water to certain plants, place a large bucket beneath the release pipe and catch the water. When the bucket is full you can carry it to selected plants and apply the water.
 - **Utilize what rain we receive:** When we do get a rain event, even a pop up afternoon shower, do not waste that water. One-inch of rain on 1,000 square feet of roof produces 650 gallons of water.
 - **Make a rain barrel:** In order to make the most of the rains we receive build your own rain barrel. For instructions and supplies visit http://water.cobbcountyga.gov/files/rain_barrel.pdf.
 - **Purchase a rain barrel:** If you do not want to make your own rain barrel some garden supply stores carry them. Conduct a web search to find multiple rain barrel suppliers. For additional resources please contact the Water Efficiency office at 770-419-6244.
 - **Catch Water Inside:** Place a bucket in the shower while waiting for your shower to heat up. Capture the excess water and use it on your most valued plants. Save rinse water from hand washing dishes.
 - **Be creative and efficient:** When you catch this water use it as efficiently as possible.
 - **Create a slow water system:** Collect empty plastic gallon jugs. When you have captured these alternate sources of water use them to fill these jugs. Perforate the bottom with small nail holes and place them around the roots of the plants you are trying to maintain. It may not be pretty, but slow water delivered to the roots can be just the prescription your plants need to survive the drought.

- **Tree bags:** Purchase tree or gator bags to maintain trees. These can be found by doing a web search. Use the alternate water you have captured to fill the bags. Water will be delivered to the roots of your trees slowly and deeply.
- **Plant maintenance techniques:** How you maintain your plants during the current drought and level 4 water ban will make a difference in the survival of the plants.
 - **Mulch:** Four to five inches of mulch around the plants can hold in what moisture the plants receive and protect the roots from heat.
 - **Types of mulch:** The best mulches to use are fine textured woody mulches, shredded hardwood, pine straw, and pine bark mini nuggets are the best choices.
 - **Avoid:** Using rocks in landscape areas with plants. The rocks hold and radiate heat increasing moisture loss. Do not mound mulch over the trunks of plants; it encourages infestations and disease.
 - **Amendments:** Additions to the soil can help your plants through this difficult time.
 - **Water absorbing polymer gels:** Hard crystalline gels, available at nurseries or on-line through a web search can be added to flower beds and container plantings. These gels absorb several hundred times their weight in water, swell up like gelatin and release water slowly to the roots over time. There is no guarantee on these products, but some landscape professionals have reported success with them. For best results mix the gels uniformly in soil and do not exceed the recommended application rate.
 - **Avoid disturbing soil around plants:** A key to plant survival will be avoiding activities that stress plants. Moving soil and digging around the plant causes the plant stress. During this time “little benign neglect” may benefit your plants the most.
 - **Fertilizer:** Avoid fertilizing plants when in a total water ban. Fertilizer encourages plant growth and water is needed for growth. The idea during this time is to preserve the plants. The best way to do this is to keep the plant’s maintenance demands low. Fertilizer also can act as a drying agent and increase water loss from the plant.
 - **Weed Control:** This is absolutely vital during a total outdoor water ban. The weeds are in direct competition for the precious water the plant will receive. Removal of weeds is necessary to ensure the plants receive all benefits from the water available.
 - **Tough Love:** Annual flowers, some perennials and even some shrubs will wilt and approach the “permanent wilting point” when the water demand of the top exceeds the water supply from the roots.
 - **Cut Back:** The only way to preserve plants at this stage is to cut back the foliage substantially to decrease the demand on the root system. Some annuals may need to be cut close to ground level. Some shrubs may require one-third to one-half of the canopy cut back.

- **Clues of permanent wilt:** Physical wilt that does not subside even in cooler weather or early morning, gray-green foliage color, severe leaf cupping, leaf scorching, and branch die back.
- **Some of the most vulnerable plants:** Keep a close eye on the following as drought and the outdoor water ban are likely to be most stressful for: azaleas, dogwoods, hydrangeas, some viburnums, and Japanese Maples.

For more tips on protecting your plants during drought contact the Cobb County Extension Office at 770-528-4080.